

# A PHOENICIAN PARALLEL TO PSALM 29

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Since H. L. Ginsberg's 1935 classic essay identifying Psalm 29 as an Israelite adaptation of a Canaanite hymn, this poem has been the subject of a number of studies. Given his hypothesis, it comes as no surprise that some attention in these studies has been given to investigating the hypothetical Canaanite connection, especially in the light of Ugaritic literature. Yet despite the fact that this background continues to be widely taken for granted,<sup>1</sup> very little parallel material from these sources has turned up. In the present study I shall first point out a "Canaanite" text that closely resembles one verse of this psalm (Ps 29:11). Then, on the basis of this parallel, I shall draw some conclusions about the translation of the verse in question.

## THE PHOENICIAN PARALLEL

Psalm 29:11 reads as follows:

*yhwh ʿōz lēʿammô yittēn*  
*yhwh yēbārēk ʿet-ʿammô baššālôm*

This passage bears a close resemblance to part of the Karatepe inscription (*KAI* 26) which has been known for a number of years (preserved in three Phoenician and two Hieroglyphic Luwian versions). Scholars<sup>2</sup> have paid too little attention to the full extent of the parallel, in part because the royal blessing (A III 2–7 = C III 16–IV 1) has only recently been subjected to a thorough literary analysis (Barré, 1982).

1. A list of scholars who do not accept the theory of the "Canaanite" background of Psalm 29 would include Margulis (1970), Cunchillos (1976, p. 183), Craigie (1979), and Loretz (1984). Recently A. Malamat (1988) has noted some connections with Amorite literature, specifically the foundation inscription of Yaḥdun-Lim. These appear to be superficial and tenuous at best.

2. The syndetic parataxis of the nouns ʿz and šlm in the Karatepe text and the correspondence to Ps 29:11 was noted by Avishur (1984, p. 547).

[III 16]wbrk[17]b<sup>c</sup>l krntryš

ʔyt ʔztwd

bh[18]ym

wbšlm

wb<sup>c</sup>zʔdr <sup>c</sup>l kl mlk

May Baal-KRNTYŠ bless

Azatiwad(a)

with life,

and with health,

and with vigor

greater than (that of)

any (other) king;

[19]lty b<sup>c</sup>l krntryš

lʔztwd

[20]ʔrk ymm

wrb šnt

wršʔt n<sup>c</sup>mt[IV 1]w<sup>c</sup>zʔdr <sup>c</sup>l kl mlk

May Baal-KRNTYŠ give

to Azatiwad(a)

length of days,

and multitude of years,

and good old age—<sup>3</sup>

and vigor

greater than (that of)

any (other) king.<sup>4</sup>

With the exception of the divine names and the word (lē)<sup>c</sup>ammô, for which Karatepe has the king's name, every word in Ps 29:11 corresponds to a cognate term in the Karatepe text<sup>5</sup> (the following chart reflects the order of terms in the psalm):

3. The late S. Gevitz (1987, p. 160 n. 18) has objected to the translation "old age." He prefers "authority," observing that in the Near East elders are often authority figures. Nevertheless I maintain that "old age" is the only acceptable translation here—not "authority"—for the following reasons: (1) The word is clearly ršʔt, i.e., from a root \*ršʔ, attested in ancient Ethiopic with the meaning "to be old." One may therefore not equate it with the root ršh (< \*ršy) (cf. the hapax rišyôn "authorization" in Ezra 3:7) without some supporting evidence. (2) What sense does the phrase "good [n<sup>c</sup>mt] authority" really make? "Good" as opposed to "bad authority"? On the other hand, "good old age" is a well-attested expression: cf. Hebrew šēbā ḵōbā (Gen 15:15; 25:8; Judg 8:32; 1 Chr 29:28) and Akkadian šībūtu damiqtu (Barré, 1982, 191). (3) One must keep in mind the genre of this text—a royal blessing. Why would one wish that the gods give "authority" to a king, who already possesses supreme authority by virtue of kingship? I can think of no ancient Near Eastern blessing in which "authority" is wished for a reigning monarch. (4) Gevitz has ignored the significant structural aspects of the Karatepe royal blessing. Like KTU 5.9.2–6, it divides the blessing "life" into two sections, the first mentioning its qualitative aspects—"life [itself]," "[good] health," and "vigor"—the second, its quantitative aspects—"length of days," "multitude of years," and ršʔt n<sup>c</sup>mt (<sup>c</sup>z is added a second time to bring the number of blessings to seven and to round out the series). "Authority" simply does not fit in such a carefully structured context and so cannot be an acceptable translation in this passage.

4. For this translation, see Barré (1982, p. 179).

5. Even the divine names may have been closer than now appears, if in fact the hypothetical Canaanite "original" of the psalm read b<sup>c</sup>l rather than yhw, as a number of scholars have argued. See, for example, Cross (1973, p. 152 n. 23) and in particular Fitzgerald (1974, pp. 61–63).

	PSALM 29:11	KARATEPE TEXT
divine name	<i>yhw</i> <sup>h</sup>	<i>b<sup>c</sup>l-krntryš</i>
specific blessing	<i>ʕz</i>	<i>ʕz</i>
indirect object	<i>l<sup>c</sup>mw</i>	<i>l<sup>p</sup>ztdw</i>
verb	<i>ytn</i>	<i>ltty</i> <sup>6</sup>
divine name	<i>yhw</i> <sup>h</sup>	<i>b<sup>c</sup>l-krntryš</i>
verb	<i>ybrk</i>	<i>brk</i>
<i>nota accusativi</i>	<i>ʔt</i>	<i>ʔyt</i>
direct object	<i>ʕmw</i>	<i>ʔztdw</i>
specific blessing	<i>bšlwm</i>	<i>bšlm</i> <sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable point of correspondence between the two texts is the fact that they share two word-pairs found nowhere in the MT outside of Ps 29:11: *nātan* // *bērēk* and *ʕōz* // *šālôm*.<sup>8</sup> The formulaic relationship of the first set of terms in Karatepe (*brk* and *ltty* [*< ytn*]) is evident from the “diptych” arrangement of the blessing with its series of interconnecting parallelisms between the two “columns”; the verbs in question stand at the head of the two parts and are clearly in parallel relationship (Barré, 1982, pp. 179–81, 192). Similarly in Ps 29:11 the two verbs are parallel (*yittēn* // *yēbārēk*). As for the second set of terms, in the first part of the Phoenician text the formulaically related nouns *šlm* and *ʕz* are juxtaposed. The repetition of the word *ʕz* in the second part is best explained on the grounds of stylistic considerations (see Barré, 1982, pp. 184–85). The Hebrew cognate nouns are parallel in the psalm verse (Craigie, 1979, p. 139; Avishur, 1984, pp. 446, 461).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR DATING

The Karatepe inscription is probably to be dated to the late eighth century B.C.E. (Barré, 1982, p. 192 n. 60). The closest Phoenician parallel to the use of *brk* and *ytn* in a blessing is several centuries later: the funerary inscription of Yehawmilk of Byblos (KAI 10) dating from approximately

6. This form is to be parsed as the infinitive construct of the verb *ytn* (\**titt-* < \**tint-*) with the 3rd sing. masc. suffix *-y* preceded by the preposition *l-*. For the precativ modalities reflected in the translation (“May he give . . .”), see Barré (1983, pp. 411–22, esp. 411–14).

7. The sequence of terms in the Karatepe inscription (*šl[w]m . . . ʕz*) is reversed in Ps 29:11. One of the factors that may have influenced the order is an affinity in psalm composition for concluding with a reference to *šlwm* or a word containing this root (i.e., in the last verse), which may have something to do with the fact that *š-l-m* means “to be finished, completed, ended.” Cf. Pss 4:9; 61:9; 116:18–19; 120:7; 125:5; 128:6; 135:21; Luke 1:79.

8. Avishur (1984, p. 547) notes the syndetic parataxis of the two nouns in a Sephardic benediction: *brb ʕz wšlwm*.

the fifth century B.C.E. Striking Akkadian parallels to the royal blessing date from approximately the same period as Karatepe (Barré, 1982, p. 192 n. 60). In particular, the parallel use of the verbs “bless” and “give”—in that sequence—in Akkadian epistolary blessings is well-attested specifically during the Sargonid period (8th–7th centuries B.C.E.) (ibid.).

Do these facts support an eighth-century *terminus a quo* for Ps 29:11? Not necessarily. Several elements in the Karatepe inscription turn out to be fixed expressions with a long history in ancient Near Eastern blessings, attested at least as early as the Late Bronze period. In addition to biblical passages (see 1 Sam 2:10; Pss 68:35–36; 86:16), we find the Akkadian equivalent of *nātan* <sup>°</sup>*ōz lē-* in epistolary blessings in the Amarna correspondence of Rib-Addi of Byblos.<sup>9</sup> The rare pairing of the roots *šlm* and <sup>°</sup>*zz* appears in an ancient West-Semitic context predating Karatepe. In the blessing of a letter from Ugarit (*KTU* 5.9.2–6) the verbs *šlm* and <sup>°</sup>*zz* are juxtaposed:

*ilm tgrk tšlmk t°zzk*  
*alp ym*<sup>10</sup> *wrbt šnt b°d °lm*

May the gods preserve you(r life),  
 keep you in (good) health,  
 (and) give you vigor/strength  
 for a thousand days,  
 ten thousand years—  
 yes, forever!<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it would be rash to conclude from the evidence presented thus far that the *terminus a quo* for Ps 29:11 must be the eighth century B.C.E. (direct dependence of the psalm on the Phoenician inscription is certainly out of the question). The most likely explanation for the similarity between the two texts would seem to be that both depend on a common literary tradition of Near Eastern blessing formulas.<sup>12</sup>

9. I.e., at the beginning of the following Amarna letters from the court of Rib-Addi: #68, 74–76, 78–79, 81, 83, 85, 89, 92, 105, 107–10, 112, 114, 116–19, 121, 125, 130, 132 (Knudtzon, 1915). The blessing reads (with some variants): *bēltu ša Gubla tidden dunna ana šarri bēliya*, “May the Lady of Byblos give power/might to the king my lord.”

10. See Pardee and Whiting (1987, p. 11 n. 24).

11. For the translation, see Barré (1982, pp. 184–85).

12. Other studies, notably that of Hillers (1964), have documented the existence of curse formulas in widespread use throughout the ancient Near East. It would be fatuous to deny the existence of a similar stock of blessing formulas used in various languages in this area.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATION

Modern translations of Ps 29:11 render the verbs in one of three ways: (1) in the present tense ("Yhwh gives . . . , Yhwh blesses . . . ");<sup>13</sup> (2) the future tense ("Yhwh will give . . . , Yhwh will bless . . . ");<sup>14</sup> or (3) the precative mood ("May Yhwh give . . . , May Yhwh bless . . . ").<sup>15</sup> All the cognate texts referred to above (Phoenician, Ugaritic, and Akkadian) which have elements in common with Ps 29:11 and *KAI* 26 are *blessings*. The rare pairing of both *nātan* // *bērēk* and <sup>c</sup>*ōz* // *šālôm* is attested outside of Ps 29:11 only in Near Eastern blessings. These data would suggest that the psalm verse too—whether or not one considers it a secondary addition—should be construed as a blessing and translated "May Yhwh give . . . , May Yhwh bless. . . ."

The Karatepe blessing may also have relevance for the interpretation of the parallel nouns <sup>c</sup>*ōz* and *šālôm* in the psalm. Each of these has a comparatively wide semantic range in Northwest Semitic. But in the case of the Karatepe text the meaning of the cognate terms can be established with precision. There they mean precisely "vigor/vitality" and "health" respectively as can be seen from their close association with *hym* ("life"). This is confirmed by a number of Akkadian and especially Anatolian blessings, where the three concepts occur together in the same sequence.<sup>16</sup>

The cognate forms of *šālôm* are found rather frequently in Akkadian and Aramaic epistolary blessings (Akkadian *šulmu*, Aramaic *šlm*).<sup>17</sup> In these contexts it must be translated "health" (Barré, 1982, pp. 188–89) or possibly "well-being." It is not difficult to see why this is so. The principal concern of virtually all ancient Near Eastern blessings (and of letter-blessings in

13. Present tense: in the following English translations: *JB*, *TEV*, *NIV*; and by the following commentators: Beaucamp (1976, no page number); Coppens (1977, p. 318); Gaster (1946–1947, p. 63; 1961, p. 446); Margulis (1970, p. 335).

14. Future tense: in the following English translations: *KJV*, *NEB*, Zerr (1979, p. 58); and by the following commentators: Craigie (1983, p. 242); Dahood (1966, p. 175).

15. Precative mood: in the following English translations: *RSV*, *NAB*, *JPS*; by the following commentators: Oesterley (1962, p. 260); Strauss (1970, p. 91); Kraus (1972, p. 233); Freedman and Hyland (1973, p. 238); Loretz (1984, pp. 24, 59); Ravasi (1985, p. 522).

16. The nuance of the three terms *hym wšlm w<sup>c</sup>z*, which occur consecutively in the Karatepe blessing, may be determined with precision from parallel expressions in certain Cuneiform Luwian and especially Hittite formulas. Hittite *huišwatar*, *ḫaddulatar*, and *innara(u)atar* mean precisely "life, health, (and) vigor." See Barré (1982, pp. 187–89), Kammenhuber (1953, pp. 30–36), and recently Hoffner (1987, p. 53). <sup>c</sup>*z* seems to denote the "stamina" or "vitality" that underlies the ability to live a long, healthy life. The best translation of the term in this sense would be the German *Lebenskraft*. Thus it is really an aspect of "life."

17. For the Akkadian equivalents, *balāṭu* and *šulmu* (usually in reverse order), see *CAD* B: 46–50; for the Aramaic cognates, *hyyin* and *šlm*, see Greenfield (1971, p. 266).

particular) is the good health and (physical) well-being of the person upon whom the blessing is invoked. Thus, while *šālôm* may have a variety of possible nuances, its meaning in our context (most likely a blessing) is restricted. *Šālôm* in the present verse should be translated as "health" or perhaps, somewhat more broadly, "(physical) well-being." Hence v. 11b might best be rendered, "May Yhwh bless his people with health/well-being!"

The evidence from Karatepe and the parallelism with *šālôm* indicate that *ʿōz* must lie in the same semantic field as "health" or "well-being." Therefore a translation such as "victory" (Freedman and Hyland, 1973, pp. 238, 254) is unacceptable. Even Craigie's "protection" (1983, p. 242), though better, falls wide of the mark. If the Phoenician parallel has any relevance to the psalm passage at all, it excludes a militaristic interpretation of the two nouns. Taking these facts into account, the best translation of *ʿōz* in v. 11a would be something like, "May Yhwh give vigor/vitality to his people."

Finally, how does this translation of *šālôm* and *ʿōz* fit with the body of the psalm?<sup>18</sup> "Health" and "vigor" are aspects of "life," and life in the human order is the fruit of divine blessing. Blessing, which imparts life and vitality to humankind (Scharbert, 1975, p. 294), is the result of Yhwh's beneficent reign—the theme that concludes the body of the psalm (v. 10)—just as in theory it results from the reign of his vice-regent, the king of Judah (cf. Psalm 72). In short, the mythic drama of Psalm 29 reaches a climax in v. 10, with the proclamation of Yhwh as divine king; v. 11 (whether or not it is original to the poem) marks a transition from the realm of myth to that of salvation history, where that timeless reign issues in life-sustaining benefits for the king's subjects (Israel)—"vigor" and "well-being."

18. I leave aside here the difficult issue of whether or not v. 11 is integral to the original poem. There are several reasons for understanding v. 11 as an addition to the original psalm: (1) The sudden reference to Yhwh's people contrasts with the body of the psalm, where the *dramatis personae* are Yhwh and the divine beings; (2) Several psalms are concluded with a prayer-like verse or verses, at least some of which might be seen as secondary (Pss 28:8–9; 51:30–31; 69:36–37; 125:5c; 128:5c; 131:3). Among those who argue that v. 11 is an addition to the psalm are Gunkel (1926, p. 124), Ginsberg (1935, p. 474), and Szöreni (1961, p. 555). On the other hand, vv. 1 and 11 form an inclusio and this favors v. 11 being an integral part of the psalm. The word *ʿōz* occurs at the end of the first bicolon (v. 1) and at the beginning of the last bicolon (v. 11). Avishur (1984, p. 235) notes that the inclusion consists not simply of this word but also the concept "give"—*hābû lē* (v. 1) and *yittēn lē* (v. 11). The complete inclusion thus consists of the chiasm *hābû lē-X . . . ʿōz* and *ʿōz lē-Y yittēn*. Note further that while in v. 1 Yhwh is the recipient of *ʿōz*, in v. 11 he gives *ʿōz* to his people (Avishur, 1984, *ibid.*). Freedman and Hyland (1973, p. 255) show that the introduction (vv. 1–2) and conclusion (vv. 10–11) of the poem have almost the same number of syllables (i.e., 37 and 36 respectively); this might suggest that v. 11 is integral to the poem.

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